

Golden Sun: The Trials of Christmas

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Summary: It's Christmas time for the Trials of Destiny Crew! Each of the adventurers must seek out the perfect present for their Secret Santa, but will finding them be as simple as it sounds? Completed.

***Chapter 1*: Christmas in the Air**

Author's Note: Well, I'm getting in the holiday spirit now. I'm joining many other authors in a festive celebration. If you want to understand this story better, it would be a good idea to read "Golden Sun: The Trials of Destiny" for some background. This is now officially a sequel in its reposting, not just a half-sequel. There will be a sequel to this as well.

Also, considering this fic had some. . . "technical difficulties" because of a certain author who shall remain nameless, no muse rants will be posted here and the responses to the author who stirred up trouble last time have been removed. This is to ensure that there is nothing wrong with this story. With that, I urge you to enjoy the fic.

Disclaimer: I don't own Golden Sun, or any of the related characters. They belong to Camelot Software. Dargon and Triad are my creations, however. So, they belong to me! So there.

Isaac stood at the helm of the Lemurian ship and wiped some of the freshly falling snow from his hair. They had left Titanus the week before and were well on their way out to sea. Out here, the snow fell freely, and it slowly accumulated in the ship. The snow was falling moderately hard, and Isaac could see Ivan dumping the excess snow out of the crow's nest. He smiled; the Jupiter Adept didn't care for being in a small confined space during a snowstorm, but he had the best eyesight out of all the adventurers. Isaac turned as he heard the soft crunching of snow as someone ascended the stairs nearby. When the figure had fully arisen, he looked into the sparkling aqua eyes of his true love.

"Hello, Isaac. I brought you some hot soup." She said, carrying a goblet covered by her hand. The Venus Adept smiled warmly at the sight of Mia. "I figured you would enjoy something warm after being out here in the snow and cold."

"Thanks, Mia. I appreciate it very much." Isaac smiled. "Though, I don't much hate the snow anymore." He smiled. When Mia approached closer, he quickly gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"Isaac. . ." She sighed, somewhat dreamily. "You'd best drink it before it cools." She said, handing him the large cup. He quickly sipped from it before covering the mouth of the cup with his hand.

"Wow. Imilian Pepper Stew? It's perfect for a day like this." He drank heartily from the goblet after he finished speaking.

"Well, I knew how much you liked it in Imil, so I thought that you might like it on such a cold day." Isaac's smile grew even warmer as he drew Mia into a hug.

"How do you do it, Mia? How do you make me love you more with each passing day?" Isaac asked.

"I don't know, Isaac. . . I don't think you have an answer to my question either."

"What's that?"

"The same one you asked."

"You're right, I don't have an answer." He replied, pulling back to drink more of the hot broth Mia had so lovingly prepared. The soup had a spicy taste to it, but it was not overwhelming, either. The stew actually warmed Isaac's

body from the inside out; a feeling he enjoyed a great deal.
"All I know is that I wish these days could go on forever."

Mia smiled as he finished; her face was blushing slightly.
"Isaac, you're such a flatterer. You need to stop doing that."

"Sorry, I can't do that." Isaac stated, kissing Mia on the cheek again. He finished off the soup from the goblet and quickly put it down on the pedestal of the Black Orb. With his other arm free, he wrapped Mia in a complete hug.
"Thank you, Mia. You're the best."

"Well, isn't this cute?" Triad stated, looking up from below. Isaac and Mia looked down at the young inventor, but they didn't release each other. "Someone's getting in the holiday spirit."

"What?" Isaac asked.

"Oh come on, Isaac. Surely you haven't forgotten what's coming up in about a week?" Triad asked. A flash of realization flooded Isaac's face.

"Oh, I'm an idiot! I completely forgot!" Isaac laughed. "It's only a week until Christmas!"

"You'd forgotten, Isaac?" Mia asked. "Well, I guess with all the things that had happened over the past few weeks, it seems logical."

"Too bad we're not near a port. It's going to be awfully hard to give presents when you're out at sea where the only thing you can find is fish." Isaac sighed. "Then again, a grilled sturgeon sounds pretty good right now. . ."

"Isaac, you know I'm the one who's supposed to be making the wisecracks!" Triad called up. "Besides, according to my

charts, we should be finding land within a matter of hours."

"Land Ho!" Ivan shouted. "I see a port directly ahead of us, about 2 kilometers out!"

"Well, maybe seconds." Triad sighed, upset that he had miscalculated.

"Did someone call for land?" Dargon asked, ascending from below decks.

"Yes, Dargon. Get Gareth and the others up here pronto; we don't know where we are exactly, so I want to be ready to disembark when we get there."

"Well, Isaac. . . if my calculations were correct, we should be landing on the island of Fanten. The chief city on the island is the port of Fanten City. Apparently the people on the island really lacked imagination when it came to naming their beloved town."

"Jeez, Triad, that was cold." Jenna stated, coming up from below decks. "When do we make landfall?"

"Probably in about fifteen minutes, so get what you want to take ashore ready to go so we can find an inn." Isaac stated.

"No problems there; we keep our stuff packed up so we can be ready at anytime." Dargon replied.

"That's good to hear. I thought Mia and I were the only ones who did that." Isaac said, sheepishly. "Well, all's ashore that's going ashore!"

Isaac, Gareth, Mia, Ivan, Sheba, Jenna, Dargon, Felix, and Triad walked into the town inn of Fanten City, where they quickly found a table in the restaurant area. All of them were cold and were glad to sit in the warm facility.

"I can't believe you forgot it was Christmas soon, Isaac." Gareth smirked, smacking his friend on the back. "Boy, I thought you were the smart one among the lot of us!"

"I thought that was my job!" Triad said.

"No, you're the village idiot." Jenna smiled.

"That's Gareth's job!" Triad snapped back.

"No, I'm the jester and you know it!" Gareth laughed.

"Well, whatever the case may be, how are we going to celebrate Christmas?" Felix asked.

"I don't know. . . What do you think, Sheba?" Ivan asked.

"I have an idea. Back in Lalivero, the people would draw names out of a bowl, and whatever name they drew was the person they had to buy the present for. After the present is given, the receiver could guess who got him the gift. If he guessed right, the person must step forward. If they get it wrong, the gifter may remain anonymous." Sheba replied.

"Sounds entertaining. I'm in." Triad stated. "I brought some paper and a lead stick, so I'll write the names down." Triad pulled a sheet of paper from a small bag on his belt and tore it into nine pieces. He quickly scribbled down everyone's names down on each of the scraps. "Anyone have an empty bag?" Felix nodded, and handed him the bag. Triad slipped all the pieces in, and shook it up. "All right, who's first?"

***Chapter 2*: The Hat's Choosing**

"Ok, I'll be the first one." Dargon stated after no one spoke up right away. He stuck his hand in the bag Triad held wide open, and took a small slip, making sure no one saw the name. He glanced at the name on the paper carefully. It simply read "Triad". Dargon grimaced. He somehow got the unnerving feeling Triad was playing a joke on them. . . yet he saw him write everyone's name down differently. It was probably just dumb luck.

"Who's next?" Triad said.

"My turn!" Gareth shouted eagerly. He quickly reached into the bag and pulled out a strip of paper. He looked at the paper as soon as he drew it, and his eyes went wide. "Umm, Triad. . . I drew myself. Now what?"

Triad looked to Sheba, who motioned for Gareth to put his name back in the bag. The Mars Adept did so, and Triad shook up the bag again. Gareth stuck in his hand again, and produced another slip of paper. He glanced at its text, which read "Garet." He burst out laughing, figuring how dumb that luck was.

"Okay, put it back in and we'll try again." Triad said. Gareth did so, and he reached in again after Triad shook the bag once more. The Mars Adept pulled out another slip of paper, and hoping the third time was a charm, he read it. The paper's lead scribbled letters read: Gareth.

"DO'H!" Gareth exclaimed.

"Dammit, this I getting really old really fast!" Triad shouted. "Okay, this time set the damn paper on the table and draw

again!" Gareth stuck his hand back in the bag and withdrew it a moment later. "If it says 'Garet' one more time, I swear I'm going to start saying some four letter words to color up my dialogue!"

"Don't worry, it doesn't." Gareth sighed, reading his slip. It read "Felix", so everything was going to be okay, and Triad wasn't about to use several inappropriate expletives. Triad sighed in relief and slipped Gareth's name back into the bag.

"Okay, I guess I'll go now." Ivan stated. He reached in, and found the slip marked 'Dargon'. Simple enough.

"May I go now?" Mia asked, politely. Triad nodded, and Mia's hand slipped into the bag, and she produced a slip marked for Jenna.

"Your turn, Sheba." Triad stated. "Pick a good one."

"Certainly." She replied. Reaching in to the small sack, she secured the slip marked for Isaac. She smiled inwardly; she could really have some fun with this.

"Next?"

"I'll go now." Jenna replied. Jenna's hand slipped into the bag carefully and she produced a slip in her hand. Keeping it hidden, she read the name to herself. Gareth. Quite ironic, she thought. She was going to have a good time messing with his mind this Christmas; her revenge for the fiasco two years before. . . She may have loved Gareth, but that didn't stop him from being a target.

"Felix?"

"Sure." Felix sighed, quietly. He reached in, hoping to get his little sister; she was easy to buy for. He produced the Ivan

slip, and he sighed in mild relief. Ivan was quiet, and he would be easy enough to buy for. The Venus Adept already had a good idea what to get the young Jupiter Adept.

"Isaac, you're the last one besides me." Triad stated.

"Right, right." Isaac fingered one of the remaining two strips and pulled it from the bag. He looked carefully at the name, and found what he hoped and expected. Mia. This was going to be a piece of cake. He couldn't help but smile at the irony of such a thing, but he decided to keep a poker face to avoid incriminating himself.

"All right, I have whoever's left." Triad removed the final slip from the bag and looked at it covertly. Sheba. No problem at all. "Well, that's everyone. Anything else we should know, Sheba?"

"Yes. You can share with others who you have, but I wouldn't recommend it. This is a perfect time to enact a policy in which you use caution in letting others know anything. If you see someone shopping, don't pester them if it can be avoided."

"Well, let's get ready to eat! Our food is coming!" Isaac pointed out.

"FOOD!" Gareth shouted, obviously excited. He proceeded to bang his fork and knife on the table in anticipation. "FOOD, FOOD, FOOD, FOOD!"

"Batten down the hatches. . . Gareth's going to pig out." Jenna sighed.

"I'm so stuffed. . ." Gareth moaned, as he lay in the bed across from Isaac.

"If you hadn't eaten enough food to feed ten people, maybe you wouldn't be having indigestion, Gareth!" Isaac replied. "If you stuck with your original three times ration, you'd be fine." The room was dark, so all they could make out of each other were silhouettes.

"Stop ridiculing me! Just because you can eat like a bird and survive doesn't mean you have the right to make fun of me!"

"Gareth, I eat quite a bit, you know."

"Still, you eat like a bird!"

"Chicken or crow?"

"Dodo is more like it, Isaac."

"That's it!" Isaac shouted. "I'll make sure you get a nice big lump of coal in your stocking this year, Gareth!"

"Good! That means I have something to burn!"

"Maybe just a rock then."

"Aww! I want to burn something!"

"Burn yourself!"

"Next time, I'll share a room with Triad! At least he knows when to shut up!"

Isaac burst out laughing. "No, he doesn't, Gareth! He couldn't figure out when to shut up if his life depended on it."

"Damn! You're right again, Isaac." Gareth replied, stifling his laughter. They were silent for a few moments before Gareth continued. "Isaac. . . what are we going to do after we finish adventuring?"

"I don't know, Gareth." Isaac answered after a long pause. "With Vale gone, there's no home for us to go back to. . . Mia and Dargon could always go back to Imil, while Ivan could go to Kalay, and Sheba back to Lalivero. I don't know where Triad would go, and you, me, Felix, and Jenna have nowhere to go."

"Isaac. . . you know darn well if Mia goes back to Imil, she'll drag you with her. You have a place to stay! Mia loves you so much it makes even my fat head spin."

"That takes some doing, doesn't it, Gareth?"

"Indeed."

"Triad definitely won't want to go back to Tolbi. . . it seems like there are too many sour memories there for him. . . to be honest, he hasn't been quite the same since we went there on our way to Titanus."

"He's been more reserved, that's for sure. You don't see as much of him. I wonder what's been bothering him so much."

"He's never said anything to anyone." Isaac paused. "Well, you, Jenna, and Felix could always come to live in Imil."

"Yeah, right. I don't want snow up to my ass half the year around, Isaac. I hate the snow!"

"Gareth, it's not that bad. . . you were there when it was pretty bad."

"Yeah, but the steaming blood from those centaur probably melted most of it!"

"Don't remind me." Isaac stated, thinking back to the centaur's siege of Imil. He, Dargon, Mia, and many of the inhabitants of Imil defended the town from the fortified walls using composite bows. The whole ordeal was a nightmare come to life, although in the end, it drew Isaac and Mia much closer than they were before, but at great cost. Isaac's mind wandered to the Mercury Adept he became so fond of.

"Hey! Quit zoning out on me, Isaac!"

"Huh?!"

"You were thinking about her again, weren't you?"

"She's always in my head, Isaac."

"You're hopeless, Isaac." Gareth paused.

"Thinking about Jenna now, Gareth?" Isaac prodded.

"Huh?! Sorry. . . Yes, I guess I was."

"I knew it. You're as hopeless as I am, Gareth."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Oh wait, I know what you're doing! You're going to try to trick me! It ain't going to happen, Isaac!"

"Me? Trick you? Why would I do such a thing, Gareth?"

"Because you're a sly and sneaky devil."

"Damn right I am!"

"Well, I'm going to turn in. . . we have some busy shopping days ahead of us now. . . it's only five days until Christmas, you know."

"Yeah, you're right. Good night, Garet."

***Chapter 3*: Holiday Knockout**

Jenna opened her dark eyes into the opening dawn. Four days now remained for Christmas shopping, and she had to get her present for Garet. She yawned lightly and sat forward in her bed, rubbing her eyes gently.

"Morning, Jenna." Mia's voice sounded quietly. You're up early.

"Hi, Mia. I guess I am an early riser this morning. I think it's because I have shopping on the mind right now." Mia smiled.

"Your secret Santa?"

"Yes. I've got to figure out what to get."

"I'd offer to help, but it's a possibility you drew me." Mia stated. "So, I can't help you, Jenna. Sorry."

"It's not a problem, Mia. By the way, where's Sheba?"

"I don't know. I think she got up even earlier than us; her bed's empty."

"Shopping, perhaps?"

"It's likely. Who knows who she got. It would be funny if she drew Ivan. I can only imagine what she'd get him."

"Probably something sappy." Jenna smiled. "Everyone knows how much of a crush she has on him."

"Like the crushes we have on our boys, right, Jenna?"

"Crushes nothing." Jenna smiled. "You know how much you love Isaac, and I know how much I love that big, good-for-nothing Garet."

"You two have a real love-hate relationship, don't you?"

"No. I just enjoy frustrating the big lug. He's so much fun to mess with, you know."

"Well, I don't know that. I just know how I feel about Isaac, and that's enough for me."

"You and Isaac are hopeless together. It's like. . . I don't know. Like Cupid decided to go rapid fire on you two."

"Maybe he did." Mia smiled. "Well, you might want to get going. Who knows how long it will take you to find a present for your person."

"It shouldn't take me too long." Jenna smiled. "I have exactly what my secret Santa needs in mind." The Mars Adept departed the room after getting changed. She descended the stairs and exited the inn with a quick pace. She stepped into the cold December air of Fenten City; the snow beneath her feet crunched as she walked carefully down the street. This place was too much like Imil; Jenna hated the snow. That is, except at Christmas time. She felt it was appropriate for the Christmas season to be white, but as soon as the joyous holiday came to a close, she wanted nothing more to see grass for the rest of the year. She shoved off in the direction of the town's bustling 'shopping district.' The couple streets- wide district had a store for just about everything, but the first place Jenna decided to go was supply store. She walked in, and quickly waited in line behind an old man who was talking with the clerk behind the counter.

"What do you mean, you don't have my teeth?!" The old man shouted, angry about something.

"Sir, this is a supply store, not the dentist's office. he's the one who has your dentures. Try going down the street."

"I came here to get me teeth, and I'm not leaving until I get me teeth!"

"But sir. . ."

"No buts, sonny! I wants me teeth!"

"Sir. . ." The clerk begged. Jenna sighed lightly and began to tap her foot impatiently. "You're holding up a line."

"Line?" He asked, turning to see Jenna standing behind him. "You call this a line?! In my day, lines were ten times as long and people had to wait ten times longer! I tell you, kids today have no respect for their elders! Now, gimme my TEETH, youngun!"

"Sir, for the last time, I don't HAVE your teeth!"

"Excuse me, sir. The clerk is right, I don't think he has your teeth." Jenna stated. The old man turned, and looked Jenna in the eye, then studied her for a moment.

"WOW! You're a knockout!" The old man exclaimed. Jenna jumped backward a foot on the saying. Jenna frowned, and promptly slugged the old man out of reaction. He fell to the ground unconscious, but still having a big grin on his face.

"How's that for a knockout, you old pervert?!" Jenna shouted, red in the face. She paused as she realized the shopkeeper was staring at her in awe. "Uh, sorry." Jenna chuckled, highly embarrassed.

"Don't be. Old Gil was getting on my nerves anyway." The shopkeeper stated. "What can I do for you today, miss?"

"Can you sell me a bag of charcoal?"

"Surly." The man said, reaching under the counter, producing a bag of the black rocks. "May I ask what you intend to cook with it?"

"Cook? Oh nothing. I'm giving it to my boyfriend for Christmas. He's going to get a kick out of it."

"Ooh, has he been bad?"

"No, not in that sense. . . he's just been. . . well, himself." Jenna smiled.

"Ah. Okay. That'll be twenty coins, please."

"No problem." Jenna smiled, handing over the money and taking the bag. "Thank you very much for your help, sir."

"My pleasure, and thank you for knocking out crazy old Gil here."

"Someone say my name?!" The old man shouted, sitting up straight.

"Gil, you may want to go back to the happy place you were in after this young lady hit you, or you may end up seeing nothing but black and blue for awhile."

"Shucks, you know she wants me."

"I do NOT!" Jenna shouted, smacking the man upside the head with the bag of charcoal briquettes. Gil promptly

passed out once more, and Jenna left the store in a bit of a huff.

Well, Jenna knew that could've gone better, but she had to admit that she was justified in using her senseless violence on the old man. Now she was in possession of Gareth's joke gift, but what could she get him for a serious present? Gareth never complained about anything except the amount of food he got or what kind of weather was going outside. He was going to be quite tough to buy for, but she figured a quick browse up the shopping district might get her a decent idea. She shuffled through the snowy streets, browsing through shop windows, trying to discern what Gareth might want. She knew he wouldn't want anything impractical; he was much like Isaac in wanting to cut down on unnecessary items that might get in the way. Even though the coal was a joke, the blackened stones still had a purpose that they could fulfill, but stuff like foot massagers and other goofy items didn't. Gareth didn't care for reading, either. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy a good book, it's just he never really had time to read. Even when he did have time, he'd usually spend the time sleeping or practicing his fighting techniques.

Anything that was food certainly wouldn't go to waste, but Gareth would have whatever food item it was gone before noon of Christmas Day. Jenna sighed as she walked by another shop, where something caught her eye. She spun, and saw a nice set of leather boots in the window. They looked especially high-quality and even though her feet weren't nearly the size of Gareth's, they looked very comfortable. She smiled, realizing Gareth's boots had recently been worse for the wear, so she quickly stepped into the shop and secured the boots from the window. They looked much like Gareth's large shoe size, so she took them up to the clerk-less counter and sat the shoes on top. She stood,

tapping her foot impatiently for a clerk to show up; eventually, she sighed and looked at the boots again.

They were a lighter brown leather than Gareth's older boots, but they'd still look good with his outfit. Again, they were massive in size, but they'd fit Gareth's enormous feet perfectly. Jenna smiled warmly. She knew the big lug would love the new footwear; best of all, she didn't have to say she got them for him. It could be her little secret if she wanted it to be, but she could easily tell him if she wanted to. Jenna frowned as she turned back to waiting for the clerk.

"Excuse me? Um, I'd like to make a purchase. . ." She called lightly.

"What?!" A voice shouted from the back room.

"I'd like to buy this pair of boots!"

"What?!"

"You know! Use money! Buy Boots!"

"What?!"

"Invest in capitalism!"

"What?!"

"Yargh!" Jenna shouted in frustration in frustration, banging her head against the counter in front of her. She turned as she heard the front door open.

"Oh, did you want to buy those?" The man who walked in asked. "I'm sorry, I was running late this morning." He said, walking behind the counter. "Ah, those boots. They're a fine choice. They're excellent boots for any season."

"They look nice. How much do I owe you?"

"Eighty coins." Jenna handed over the money.

"By the way, who's the person in the back room who can't hear anything?"

"Oh, that's Joe. He's not too bright."

"What?!"

"See what I mean?"

"I do. Thank you sir." Jenna sighed, taking the boots and leaving the shop. The only way things really could get worse is if she ran into Gareth doing his shopping. Go figure she heard the big oaf's booming voice coming down the street. Jenna caught eye of him and Isaac speaking, and Isaac seemed to be laughing his head off at something he was saying.

"It's a good thing that problem cleared up, isn't it, Gareth?!" Isaac was saying between laughs.

"Shut up, Isaac! You know it happened to you too!"

"Yeah, but it's funnier with you." Isaac gasped out. Jenna gasped as she dashed back into the boot store.

"Quick! Hide me!" Jenna told the shopkeeper.

"What?!" Joe yelled.

"My boyfriend's coming and I don't want him to see me!"

"Fine, get behind the counter!" The shopkeeper said. "Duck behind the counter." Jenna did as ordered, and just as Gareth

walked into the store.

"Hang on, Isaac. I want to look at some boots. . . boots make good gifts."

"Yeah, I think I'll look myself." Isaac stated, not giving any indication who his person to gift was. Isaac browsed through the shelves of boots along with Gareth.

"So, do you think you know who your secret Santa is, Gareth?"

"Not a bloody clue. For all I know, you could be it."

"Yeah, or it could be you."

"Very droll, Isaac." Gareth retorted.

"Droll? You actually used an uncommon word! I think that's the third sign of the apocalypse."

"Shut up, Isaac." Gareth sighed. "You're full of it today, you know that, right? What'd you put in your coffee this morning?"

"Didn't have any, and you know it. I think it's just the Christmas spirit, Gareth. Why don't you let it get to you?"

"I think the eggnog's been getting to YOU, Isaac."

"I don't even like eggnog!"

"Can I help you gentlemen?" The shopkeeper asked.

"No, we're just looking." Gareth replied. "Thank you, though."

"What?!"

"Who was that?" Isaac asked, puzzled.

"Just my idiotic assistant, Joe. Ignore him." The Adepts shrugged, and continued browsing the store for about twenty minutes before finally leaving with a list of possible boots to get for the people they were buying for. Of course, Isaac's list was completely bogus, and Gareth's was far from true as well, but he did make sure to make note of a pair of dark boots for Felix.

"Okay, they're gone now, you can come out." The shopkeeper told Jenna.

"Thanks. I owe you one."

"If you don't mind my asking, which one was your boyfriend?"

"The bigger one with the red spiky hair. His name is Gareth. . . he's a really good guy."

"The kid with him seemed a little crazy."

"Isaac? Normally he's the most serious one among the lot of my friends. I think it's like he said: The Christmas spirit has gotten to him. Thanks again. Gareth will really love these boots."

"No problem. Have a great holiday, miss."

"I will. You have a great holiday too." Jenna smiled. "Thanks, I will."

"Merry Christmas!" Joe shouted from the back room.

"Oh, he can actually say something other than 'What?!'" Jenna laughed, on her way out of the store.

"What?!"

***Chapter 4*: Hard of Hearing?**

"So, Felix, what do you plan on doing today, big brother?" Jenna asked him in the early morning. There were now only three days remaining before Christmas's arrival.

"I plan on going out to buy my secret Santa his gift." Felix stated, tying his flowing green scarf tightly around his neck. "Hopefully, I'll be back before lunch."

"You said he. Who is it, Felix?"

"Promise you won't tell anyone, Jenna."

"I swear it, Felix." Jenna said, holding her hand up as though she were swearing on a holy object.

"Ivan."

"Jeez, I thought you had Gareth or Isaac. Don't get me going like that, Felix. Well, at least he will be easy enough to buy for, right?"

"Yeah, I was planning on getting him a book of some kind. The kid always did enjoy a good read."

"Whether it was books or minds. . ." Jenna smiled. Felix chuckled lightly; something he didn't do very often. "My, Felix, were you just laughing? I swear, it looks like the holiday spirit is infesting everyone this year." Felix laughed heartily after Jenna finished her statement, and he gave his younger sister a hug.

"So I've been infested. Let it be known that I admit it." Felix said, releasing her. "Well, I'd best be off. I'll see you later, Jenna." The Venus Adept stated, leaving his little sister back

at the inn. He stepped out into the cloudy day and the snow crunched beneath his feet. People remained bustling everywhere through the fair port city as Felix shuffled through the streets, shielding his face from the cold north wind. The cold was biting today and it reminded him of the weather of the northern mountains the village of Imil was nestled in. That was weather he didn't hate, but weather he could live without. He squinted through his hand as he tried to look for the bookstore they had passed on the way to the inn. After walking halfway back to the wharf, Felix finally spotted the shop and walked inside quickly.

The shop was scarcely lit, but Felix could see walls upon walls upon shelves of literature and writings. Felix began to look through the store for any signs of people who operated the shop, and found the counter in the back of the store. An older fellow sat behind the desk, enraptured by a rather large novel. Felix stood before him and cleared his throat softly.

"Oh, may I help you, sir?"

"Yes. What do you have that an educated reader might enjoy?"

"Lacerated pleader?! What do you mean by that?" The man replied. Felix's expression changed to confusion for a moment before he tried again.

"I'm looking for a book that a friend of mine would enjoy."

"A Chinook for a fiend of wine? I'm afraid you're not making any sense, boy."

"Are you hard of hearing, good sir?" Felix asked politely.

"What's that about lard and leering?"

"No, sir. I said 'hard of hearing', not lard and leering."

"A card and keening?" Felix slapped himself in the face in frustration and sighed. He was trying not to lose his temper, but not being understood when he was clearly speaking was one of his pet peeves.

"Alright. . . let's try this again. Hello, I'm looking for a good book."

"A lewd cook?! What are you talking about, kid?!" Felix grumbled, struggling to fight his urge to throttle the guy. "Oh, I'm sorry!" The man stated, pulling two wads of cotton out of his ears. "Sorry. I had a terrible migraine earlier, and I guess I forgot to remove my earplugs. I'm very sorry. Please accept my apologies, sir." Felix's anger quickly drained, realizing the situation. His own mother had suffered migraines many times in his childhood, and they always struck her bedridden. Those massive headaches were no laughing matter.

"It's okay. I'm just looking for a book an educated person might enjoy. A thinking person's book."

"Oh, we have plenty of that kind of thing around here. Come along now." The man said, standing up and walking over to Felix. "Now, what kind of reading does this person enjoy?"

"Just about anything, really."

"His he a math or English nut?"

"English, I think."

"Historical or Scientific way of thinking?"

"Historical."

"Ah, so he's the perfect fiction type. Now, let me see. . . is he a pacifist or is he somewhat aggressive?"

"Both."

"Both?! Oh well. . . Is he a wise or impulsive person?"

"Wise. Definitely wise."

"Then I think I have the perfect book for who you need." The shopkeeper said, directing Felix to a bookcase in the fiction section. "This book I'm thinking of has several tales of mystery and suspense. Sounds like what this person would like, correct?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"It's called 'Dark Requiem'. A very good read, mind you. It's among the most difficult stories to read, but it's an excellent choice. The plot is fantastic and characterization is incredible; it's like the author was born to write it."

"Who's the author?"

"Actually, no one really knows. The author chose to remain anonymous."

"Sounds like Ivan's perfect match." Felix stated. "I'll take it."

As Felix walked out of the bookstore with two new books, one for Ivan, and one for himself, he caught glimpse of Dargon heading into the same store. He turned and tapped his friend on the shoulder.

"Yikes!" Dargon shouted out of surprise. He spun on his heels and met the face of Felix. "Damn it, man! Don't do that!"

"Sorry. What are you doing here?"

"Looking for a present for Triad."

"Triad? What were you thinking of?"

"My first inclination was to get him a life." Felix burst out laughing and slapped his knee. "No, seriously!"

"Well, what was your second thought, Dargon?"

"I knew how much the guy loved books, so I thought it would be a good idea to get him one. Hey, who are those books for?"

"Well, this one is for Ivan." He replied, showing the book to Dargon. "And I got the other one for myself. It looked particularly interesting. So, what were you thinking of for Triad?"

"I was thinking of a fictional book. . . something to get him to shut up for awhile."

"Dargon, you know damn well Triad won't shut up if he gets a book; besides, he spends most of his time working on that flying machine of his! We hardly even see him on a normal day!"

"Well, yeah. . . maybe we can coax him out from under that tarp and out in the open with something. You know come to think of it, he's been like a recluse since we left Tolbi a few weeks ago. What's up with that kid, anyway?"

"I'm not sure. Let's just find him a gift and get out of this cold." Felix stated.

"What?! You call this cold?! We call this a heat wave in Imil!"

"I was afraid of that." Felix stated, walking back into the bookstore. Dargon chuckled and followed him back inside. Felix and Dargon began browsing through the shelves quickly, but Dargon rejected one book after another for Triad. Too idiotic, too romantic, too intelligent, too booky, too periodical. you name it.

"Okay, how about this one?!" Felix exclaimed, going to the last book in the section. "It's the last one. It's called 'Paladin's Heart'. How about that?! It's the last one and it sounds like the corniest of the bunch!"

"Actually, that sounds like a good one. Triad has some weird tastes; sound's like something he'd read."

"Or write. . ." Felix muttered under his breath.

"What was that, Felix?"

"Nothing, forget it." Felix stated. "Just pay for the stupid book and let's get out of here."

"Hey, I think I found something else he might like!" Dargon stated, walking over to the nonfiction section. "He's nuts about that physics crap; so why not get him a new physics book?"

"Sure, why not?" Felix sighed, shrugging his shoulders, holding the other book in his hand. He sighed again, waiting for Dargon to finish looking for the last present for Triad. He eventually produced a large blue book, and he went to pay for both books. Felix walked outside and waited impatiently

for Dargon to come back out of the store. The Venus Adept gazed up at the sky and sighed; the sun was setting. So much for being back at the inn before lunch.

***Chapter 5*: Why No One's Paid On Commission Anymore**

Triad thumbed through the racks of tunics trying to find something that he knew Sheba would like. Why was shopping for women so bloody hard?! He must've been through twelve stores by now, trying to find something that really caught his eye, but nothing seemed to stand out. He sighed to himself as he went through the final rack in the store. Hell, he didn't even know what SIZE to get Sheba. He knew it couldn't be a large size, given her light frame. In the end, it came down to a lucky guess. Triad sighed again; luck was never his strong point.

"Can I help you, sir?" A saleswoman asked him. "You seem lost; I don't think these clothes would look good on you."

"Ha ha. VERY funny. I'm shopping for a gift right now, not for myself!" Triad snapped. He'd been getting this all day; he was sick of getting the 'man in the woman's section' jokes. "I just can't find the right item for her."

"Her? Your girlfriend?"

"No, she's taken already, by my best friend, thank you very much." He'd been getting teased about this all day too.

"Are you jealous?!"

"No, I'm not jealous. They were made for each other!" Triad stated, obviously flustered. "Please knock it off!"

"Can't do that."

"You don't get paid on commission, do you?" Triad asked.

"Nope. I get paid the same whether I make a sale or not."

"That's nice to know. Leave me alone, I'm trying to think."

"It doesn't look like that's your strong suit. I can smell the smoke and hear the gears in your head." Triad raised his finger in protest, but instead, he turned his back and walked out the door. Triad muttered to himself the whole way down to the next store.

"Damn! Do I have a sign on my back that says 'Give me a hard time because I'm shopping for a girl who isn't my girlfriend'? Jeez! Salespeople must just hate me or something. I wish I could find one bloody worker who was getting paid on commission!!!" He muttered to himself while shivering from the snow and cold wind. He shuffled down the street and was about to enter another store.

"Triad, why are you muttering to yourself?" A voice asked him. He spun on the ball of his foot to see Mia standing next to him.

"Mia! I didn't know you were out shopping too!"

"Well, I am."

"I can see that. You were wondering what I was grumbling about? I was upset because I've been catching nothing but flak from people today. I go out shopping for my secret Santa and they give me no end of trouble."

"Well, considering you came out of a women's clothing store, I could see why." Mia stated. "It's safe to say you're either shopping for me or Sheba, correct?"

"Um. . ."

"I guess I was right."

"You were. I'm actually shopping for Sheba. . . I could use your help on this one. You know. . . you. . . being a woman and all."

"Having some trouble finding the right thing, eh?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I'll help you. I have to go into this store anyway."

"Jenna?" Triad asked.

"You got it." Mia smiled. They walked into the store together and began browsing through several more racks of clothes.

"I've seen enough racks of women's clothes today to last me a lifetime." Triad sighed. "And they don't seem to be getting any better as I go along."

"Cheer up, Triad. At least I can help you now. How about this for Sheba?" Mia asked, holding out a beautifully decorated white and dark red tunic. It was sort of the desert style clothes Sheba usually wore, but it was made more for winter weather.

"It's not bad, but I don't know."

"Well, we can always come back to it, right?"

"Yeah. Actually hang onto it for right now; we might want it."

"Good idea, Triad." Mia stated. Triad and Mia continued browsing through racks until the Mercury Adept paused.

"What is it, Mia?"

"How about this?" Mia asked, pulling out a more cream colored tunic laced with turquoise stripes; it was quite breathtaking. The set of clothes looked really like a perfect match for Sheba.

"Wow! That's great! She'll love it!" Triad exclaimed. Would you put the other one back while I go pay for this, Mia?"

"Certainly." Mia smiled. "I'm glad I could help you, Triad." The Mercury Adept turned her back and casually walked back to set the other shirt back on its proper rack while she waited for Triad to pay for the tunic. However, the sounds that reached her ears weren't exactly that of a cash register being rung up. . .

"Hey! Give me that!" A female voice sounded. "I saw it first!"

"No way! I was just about to pay for it, how can you have saw it first?!" Triad's voice sounded.

"It doesn't matter! I want it!" The voice yelled.

"Well, you can't have it!" Triad shouted back.

"It won't look good on you, you cross-dresser!"

"I don't want it for myself, stupid! I'm giving it as a gift! Or haven't you noticed that this is a WOMEN'S clothing store?!"

"Then why are you here?!"

"I just told you!" Triad's voice sounded again. Mia sighed. He'd gotten himself into trouble again, but this time it didn't sound like it was his fault. She walked calmly up to the front of the store, where a rather large woman was playing tug-of-war with Triad; both people had hold of the hanger, not

doing any damage to the shirt itself. "Leggo, will you?! Go find your own!"

"This is my own!!! Shopkeeper! This ruffian is trying to steal from me!"

"Ruffian?! Listen, lady, I've had it up to here with you. . ."

"Excuse me." Mia interrupted, kind tone in her voice. "This really isn't the time or the place for this. It's Christmas time, right? I'm sure there's another shirt in the store that you would like, ma'am." Mia smiled, warmly.

"What?!" She yelled, and then she turned to Triad. "Your girlfriend's pissing me off!"

"She's not my girlfriend, woman! She's my friend's girlfriend, now leave her out of this!"

"Well, she's so ugly, I don't know how anybody could be attracted to her." The woman stated.

"Ugly?! Get some glasses! She's a knockout and you know it! Just 'cause she's a whole hell of a lot better looking than you doesn't mean squat!" Triad exclaimed.

"What?! You are dead, little man! Then I'll take care of that wench over there. . ."

"Not on your life. Besides, if you got through me, you'd have to get through her boyfriend. Besides. . . he's not someone you want to make mad."

"Oh yeah?!" The woman shouted. Before Triad could respond, a blast of ice energy plastered the rather large and ugly woman, knocking her unconscious, but not actually

harming her. She let go of the hangar and Triad promptly put it on the counter just as the shopkeeper came out.

"Is there a problem? I thought I heard shouting."

"No, no problem here. Just want to make a purchase, that's all." Triad smiled, nonchalantly, putting the money on the counter. "Keep the change. Gotta run!" Triad stated, grabbing the shirt and jetting toward the door. Mia followed him carefully.

"The woman who wants to fight over a product. . . there's one every season." Mia smiled.

"I never thought I'd see you use your Psynergy on anyone like that. Was it because of that bad things she said about you?"

"Maybe." Mia smiled. "You'll never know."

"Remind me NEVER to get you mad. I'm just scared to think what Isaac would've done in there."

"Probably would let loose a Ragnarok so big it would decimate the entire block." Mia laughed. "So, how about joining me in the quest for finding Jenna her gift?"

"Sure. I think Jenna really likes perfume; I overheard her talking to Sheba about it when we were in Tolbi a few weeks back."

"Perfect; I know where the shop is too. Come on!" Mia laughed, dashing ahead of Triad.

"Hey! Get back here!" Triad shouted forward, trying not to let the tunic touch the ground at all. Triad finally caught up to Mia as she reached the perfume shop. As soon as Mia

opened the door, the air was filled with heavy fragrances; flowers, spices; you name anything that smelled good, it was a scent in the store. Triad's nostrils flooded with the smell, and he began to cough somewhat violently.

"You okay?" Mia asked.

"Yeah, just a little overwhelmed, that's all. Let's try to find something Jenna'll like." As they glanced at different bottles of scents, a salesperson finally came over.

"May I help you?" The shopkeeper asked.

"Yes, please." Mia smiled. Triad coughed instead of replying; he thumbed his eyes. The scents were making him tear up even behind his opaque blue sunglasses. "Sir, do you need some air?"

"No, I'm fine." Triad sighed.

"Now, what are you looking for?"

"What do you have for spunky, independent, and beautiful women?" Triad asked. Mia elbowed him in the stomach lightly. "What? That's what Jenna is, right?"

"Well, yes. Still, let me do the talking, Triad. You've had your share of trouble today." The inventor sighed and shrugged.

"Have it your way."

"Well, we have this scent." The woman stated, pulling a blue bottle from a shelf. She sprayed it into the air, and Mia and Triad caught a good smell of it. It smelled fresh and clean, much like clean spring water in a babbling brook. Triad's nostrils flared again, being exposed to yet another powerful stench.

"That one's nice. . . but my friend isn't big on the smell of water. . . though I personally love it." Mia stated.

"You would like it, Mia." Triad stated, getting another elbow in his gut. "Ow! That one really hurt!" The salesperson continued showing various scents to the two shoppers, and each one got closer to the mark of what would be good for Jenna. Finally, the saleswoman pulled out an oddly shaped crimson bottle.

"This is one of our finest scents, designed for those with a fiery personality and a love for life. The scent is quite alluring, and it is a favorite of many who visit in here. Give it a smell." She said, spraying a little of it into the air. The fragrance was sweet and hot at the same time; something of a hot cinnamon and sugar all mixed together. As soon as Triad smelled it, he stopped in his tracks and said not a word.

"Triad? Are you okay?" Mia asked.

"Ohh, No." Triad said, his voice somewhat loopy.

"Beg your pardon?"

"I'm not okay. I'm crazy like a . . . really crazy. . . thing." Triad replied, voice all over the place. He handed the tunic to Mia as he rubbed his head with his sleeve.

"What the?"

"I'm SPARTICUS!!!" Triad shouted, running around in circles before barging out of the store, babbling like a moron.

"Triad?! Is he okay?"

"I think so. I think the scents went to his head."

"I've never known anyone to get high off of perfume before. Whatever this scent is, I'll take it. Garet's gonna go nuts over Jenna now."

"Halifax! I am the Captain of the Halifax!" Triad ran around the street, still loopy from the perfume. He started waving his arms above his head and started saying stuff that made even less sense. "Adjebuna Lima Kyma!"

"Sir, are you intoxicated?" An older gentleman asked.

"Damn right, I am, kid." Triad muttered.

"Sir, I must inform the constable if you keep this up."

"A horse, a horse! My kingdom for a horse!"

"Please, you're making a fool out of yourself. Tell the truth, are you drunk?"

"YOU CAN'T HANDLE THE TRUTH!!!" Triad shouted, making even less sense with every passing moment. "Et tu, Brute?!"

"My word." The man said, running off.

"Ask of me tomorrow, and thou shall find me a grave man!" Triad called, laughing about nothing. "Soft, by what yonder window breaks?! A ROCK!" Triad shouted, leaping on his back in the middle of the road.

"Mommy, what's wrong with that man?" A little girl asked.

"He's insane, dear. The men in the white coats will be here shortly."

"I love chickens, guys!" Triad shouted. He quickly leapt back to his feet, where he stuck out his chest and began to project with the voice of an actor. "Friends, Romans, Countrymen! Lend me your ears!"

"Romans? What's he talking about?" A member of the surrounding crowds asked.

"He's drunk or something." A man replied. "All right, get on with it, man!"

Triad inhaled deeply and projected loudly, moving with each word as if he was a true actor. "To be?! Or not to be?! That is the question!" He shouted, raising his left arm into the air, looking skyward. "Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. . . or to take arms against a sea of troubles. . . and by opposing, end them?! To die, to sleep, NO MORE!" Triad shouted, with a strange drunken passion that sounded like it was genuine. "And by a sleep to say we end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to. . . 'tis a consummation devoutly to be wished! To die, to sleep! To sleep, perchance to dream: Aye, there's the rub! For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come when we have shuffled of this mortal coil, must give us pause. . ." The crowd stood silent, staring, at the 'actor' who finished giving his speech. One person began clapping, followed by another, and another, until the entire crowd erupted into applause.

"Wow, from drunk to visionary in twenty seconds. The guy's amazing!"

"Exit's that way, folks!" Triad said, pointing back down the street. "Watch your step and don't push." Triad walked back into the perfume store, the people still applauding him.

"Triad. . . are you okay?" Mia asked.

"I told you, I'm SPARTICUS!!!" Triad grinned, obviously still tanked from the smell.

"I should've known better." Mia sighed. "Come on, Sparticus. Let's go back to the inn. By the way, who's speech was that you recited?"

"I dunno, I made it up as I went along." Triad stated, dizzy.
"Alas, poor Yorek. I knew ye well."

"Okay, Mr. Actor. Let's go." Mia stated firmly, dragging Triad out of the store by his tunic's cuff.

"Cut last sequence and fade to black!" Triad stated.

"Triad, shut up."

***Chapter 6*: Why Tinsel Comes With A Warning Label**

The sun rose and Ivan stretched his thin but long arms as he sat up in bed. He brushed the flowing blonde hair from his eyes and yawned heavily. Today was his day to go shopping for Dargon, and he and Sheba had agreed to go together. Sheba had chosen to remain obscure in the identity of her target, while Ivan had told her almost right away. Ivan kicked his covers off and slid out of his bed like liquid. Standing up, he quickly changed into his purple robes and grabbed his walking stick. He turned to his roommate, the currently sleeping Triad.

"Wake up, Triad. The sun's coming up."

"Five more minutes." Triad mumbled.

"Come on, Triad. Get up; the day is calling for you!"

"No way." The inventor snapped back. "After how I disgraced myself yesterday, I'm not getting out of this bed until Christmas!"

"That's in two days, Triad. You can't stay in bed that long. Besides, it wasn't that embarrassing."

"Remember: 'I'm SPARTICUS!!!'?! " Triad sat forward, blue sunglasses still donning his face; he never took them off, even when he slept. "How about 'To be or not to be?' Huh?! You remember that?!"

"Yes, and Triad, the 'to be or not to be' thing was really inspired. Someone really should write that speech down."

"I was under the influence! How could anyone think that speech was inspired?!"

"It sounded magnificent. I'm sure whomever would put it down on parchment would certainly become famous. I hope you remember it, Triad."

"I hardly remember what I said, let alone being capable of writing it down." Triad moaned. "Go shopping with Sheba. Besides, I'm exhausted right now. I'm going back to sleep." Triad stated, his head impacting his pillow with a soft thunk. He began snoring almost instantly. Ivan chuckled to himself, leaving the muddled inventor to his sleep. He quickly left his room and descended his stairs down to the main dining room, where Sheba sat, waiting patiently.

"Hello, Ivan." Sheba smiled, seeing the wind seer entering the room. "You slept well, I hope." She stood and walked next to Ivan.

"Yes, very well." Ivan said, receiving a warm embrace from the fellow Jupiter Adept. They had been in love with each other for quite some time now, but the two younger Adepts were more quiet about their relationship than everyone else in the group. "I'm assuming your night was equally as restful?" Sheba laughed lightly.

"Yes. So, shall we go?"

"Let's." Ivan stated, as they walked out of the inn together. "So, who IS your secret Santa, Sheba?"

"If you have to know, it's Isaac, Ivan." Sheba smiled. "I really think I could enjoy buying Isaac a present. It's just a matter of thinking like Mia, right? What would Mia want to buy Isaac?"

"Isaac has an amulet right now, he's never going to get rid of that or his sword, or his scarf, either. I know. He needs a hat."

"A hat, Ivan? Why not gloves or boots, or something practical?"

"Well, his boots have been in the finest condition since I met him, and his gloves the same way. Somehow he manages to treat them so they never wear out. Isaac isn't a man for fancy clothes or jewelry either. The only jewelry I've ever seen him wear is that amulet he never lets out of his sight. There's really not much else he needs. He always keeps everything of his so well maintained while still using it very often."

"I've got an idea of what to get him besides a hat."

"What?"

"Well, he doesn't have a field knife. I've overheard him once about wanting one several weeks back, so why not get him one?" Sheba suggested.

"I still think he needs a hat."

"We can get him one of those too." Sheba smiled. "It's not like we don't have the money for both. What are you planning on getting Dargon?"

"I saw some especially nice padded gloves in a store not far from here."

"You're right, Dargon's under-gloves are getting a tad ratty, aren't they? Well, let's not waste any time. Where to first, the hat, the gloves, or the knife?"

"Let's get the knife last. It'll look funny carrying it around the whole day. Let's go grab Dargon's gloves first." Ivan replied, heading to the shop he had spotted a couple days before. The two young Jupiter Adepts walked there side by side, and entered the store and made the purchase without incident. "Well, at least my shopping was a lot easier than Triad's."

"Poor guy; he never can catch a single break, can he?" Sheba stated.

"Nope. I feel rather sorry for him sometimes. Not only does he inadvertently make a dunce out of himself at every opportunity, his past isn't all sugar and cookies either."

"I'm aware. . . it was his inventions that caused Lalivero's fall to Babi. He never intended any of them to be used in war. The amount of regret he has is amazing. . . especially how he feels of how it affected me."

"He told you? He apologized for what happened?"

"He didn't have to. There was never anything to be sorry for. Besides, after our meeting with Babi, I read his mind. . . that's how I know. He's never been able to figure out how to apologize to me."

"Not that he needs to." Ivan said.

"Not that I WANT him to." Sheba sighed. "Oh well, let's go get Isaac's gifts." She paced off for a store she knew sold almost every clothing item in the country. Sheba had scouted many of the stores in the area for the past few days now, and so she had a pretty good idea of where she was going. She and Ivan entered the store together and immediately made for the hat section.

"Wow, quite a selection. I didn't even know this many types of hats existed." Ivan stated, breathless. "Well, what suits Isaac here?" Ivan asked, picking up a hat. The hat was a black derby hat.

"No. Definitely not. How about this?" Sheba asked, pulling out a flatter hat the covered the top of the skull.

"Not at all. . . it would rest on Isaac's spiky hair, not his head." Ivan laughed, pulling out a rather large sombrero. He put it on his head, the hat's radius extending twice the width of Ivan's frame. The young Jupiter Adept looked stupidly ridiculous in the large and floppy hat. "How about this?"

"That's funny looking on you, Ivan. Besides, Isaac would hate it."

"Yeah, you're right." He said. They continued to sift through various hats until Sheba uncovered a brown snap-brimmed cap; it looked like something an adventurer would wear.

"Wow, this one's nice."

"Let me see." Ivan said, putting the hat on his own head. "Well, how do I look?"

Sheba smiled. "It looks terrible on you, but it will look great on Isaac."

"Wait, how can it look so terrible on me and look really good on him?"

"Well, the shape of your heads are different, you wear different clothes, and your eyes are different color; violet and brown doesn't mix. Blue and brown work quite well, if you ask me."

"Well, you're the one buying for him. If you say he'll like it, he most likely will. I say we take it." Ivan smiled. Sheba always did have an eye for people's tastes, and though Isaac mostly kept his personal preferences to himself, Sheba could still read him like an open book. The female Jupiter Adept didn't even need to use Mind Read to look inside peoples thoughts to find the answers to their tastes. Sheba removed the brown hat from Ivan's head and smiled. She walked toward the shopkeeper's counter and set the hat on the counter as Ivan's voice rang out.

"Sheba! How about this for Isaac?"

"Please Ivan, not another hat. . ." Sheba muttered without turning around.

"No, look what I found." Ivan smiled as he walked closer to Sheba. The female turned around and giggled at what she saw. Ivan was holding a pink bottle with a label stamped on it. Apparently, it was some kind of 'love potion'. The label said it was guaranteed to spice up a relationship. "Well, Isaac is a little lovebird, after all."

"I don't think him and Mia need the help, Ivan." She said, giggling. "But, it'd be funny to see his face when he opens it. Put it on the counter. I'd like to see what he has to say about it." She gave the money to the shopkeeper and left for the supply shop, Ivan close on her heels. "A love potion. . . If Isaac doesn't think it's funny, Mia sure as heck will."

"But its like you said. . . it's not like they need it to be all lovey- dovey." Ivan laughed. "They're together so much it makes me want to throw up sometimes!"

"If I hadn't known you were being sarcastic with a tinge of jealousy, I'd believe you." Sheba smiled. "So, you're jealous

that Mia and Isaac spend so much time together and we don't?"

"No, that's not what. . . I mean. . ."

"Don't bother, Ivan, I know how you feel. We're just different than they are, that's all."

"You're right, as usual, Sheba." Ivan sighed. "So, what kind of utility knife should we get him?" He said, as they walked into the warm store. The wall is filled with every type of knife imaginable; everything from a small kitchen knife to well sharpened machete blade. All were different sizes and makes, but they all looked practical in some form or another.

"Maybe we should get him a heavy duty medium sized knife. . ." Sheba said, reaching for a brown handled hunter's knife. "This looks sturdy enough. Do you like it, Ivan?"

"Yes."

"I'll go pay for it. Wait for me here, okay, Ivan?" Sheba stated, walking off to the counter on the other side of the store. Ivan sighed as he tapped his foot idly. He heard the giggling of children on one side of the store and looked to see. Several children were putting up a large Christmas tree, and they seemed to be having some trouble decorating it. They each fumbled with several strands of tinsel, attempting to get it on the tree. Ivan smiled, and he walked over to help.

"Do you need a hand?" He asked the two young boys and three young girls.

"Thanks mister, but I think you may be a little too short to help us decorate the entire tree."

"Short?!" Ivan replied. "I may not be tall, but I can decorate a tree with the best of them." He reached for the golden strand of tinsel and began to wrap it around the tree. The children giggled quietly behind Ivan, as he finished wrapping the strand, completing most of the difficult work. "There. You see, it's really not that. . ." He said, turning around. The children began laughing harder as they charged around the tree, each holding their own strand of tinsel. Ivan stopped speaking as he realized the children had pulled the tinsel taut around his body, effectively tying him into the pine tree. "Hey! What do you think you're doing?!" Ivan shouted, trying to struggle free. The children did nothing but laugh more as they made a second tinsel run. Ivan found himself bound even tighter to the tree. After the kids had finished their second run, the largest child, a cute twelve year old girl, took the star meant to cover the top of the tree, and placed it on top of Ivan's head.

"Talk about adding insult to injury!" Ivan whined, as the kids walked away laughing to no end. "Agh!" The young Jupiter Adept struggled strongly, only to be poked and prodded by the branches of the pine tree.

Sheba dropped the fifty coins for the knife on the counter and the shopkeeper smiled as he took the money.

"Thank you, ma'am. Have a very merry Christmas." The shopkeeper stated.

"Thank you, good sir. May you yourself have the same as you wish unto others." Sheba smiled with a reply. She walked back over to the knife section, but Ivan was found nowhere. She glanced left and right, until she heard the grunts of Ivan. She turned, and walked toward the sounds. She

immediately burst out in a deep and hearty laugh as she saw Ivan. Her true love was tied to the tree in ten strands of golden tinsel, and he couldn't seem to dislodge himself from the decorations. The coup de grace was the star that adorned his skull, and how ridiculous he looked.

"Sheba, stop laughing and get me loose!" Ivan shouted.

"No way, Ivan." Sheba said, face red with laughter and tears welling in her eyes. "I have to get this down on paper!" She laughed, producing a piece of paper and a stick of charcoal. She pulled up a chair and sat down and began sketching the picture of poor Ivan on the paper.

"Sheba! Get me down! Curse your incredible artistic skills! Sheba!"

***Chapter 7*: Old Friends**

"Well, Isaac. It's Christmas Eve. I hope you got your present for your secret Santa." Gareth jeered. "Getting Felix the boots was piece of cake, even with your goofy eggnog induced antics."

"Garet, you know I hate eggnog." Isaac grumbled, tying his golden scarf tight around his neck. "I've got it taken care of."

"I don't even think you bought it yet, did you?"

"I've got it taken care of."

"By the way, you never did fess up who your secret Santa was. Who are you buying for, anyway?!" Gareth prodded.

"You'll find out tomorrow, Gareth; leave me to my devices. Later." Isaac said, giving a half-farewell half-blow off wave over his shoulder. Isaac left the inn's room and quickly exited the temporary residence. He sighed as he walked down the shopping district and began browsing through windows of things. The truth was, he had no idea what to get Mia. He may have loved her and understood her better than anyone else, but he was hidebound to figure out her material desires. Mia was never one on material ownership, and she was always contented with what she had. What could he get her? He sighed, reaching a jewelry store. Why not give it a try? There might be the answer to his quandary here. He opened the door and kicked the snow from his boots before entering.

"May I help you, sir?" A clerk asked the Venus Adept.

"No. I'll be okay." Isaac replied, beginning to look at bracelets. Though there were several types of countless varieties, no armband seemed to leap out at the young lover. Each of the bracelets had their problems. . . too plain, too fancy, too extravagant, too ordinary, too expensive, too cheap. Although Isaac was willing to pay just about any sum, he could not place what he wanted. Sighing, he moved on to earrings. Again, nothing pleased his eyes; while Mia would surely like anything he got for her, nothing seemed to be special enough. He moved over to rings. Nothing special. Isaac growled to himself in frustration. Why did this have to be so hard?! He finally moved over to necklaces and amulets. The racks were again piled high in beautiful looking baubles. He fingered through each amulet until he stumbled across the most beautiful amulet he had ever seen.

It was of the shiniest of platinum, the charm large and beautiful. The charm of the amulet was in the shape of a crescent moon, and in its concave area lay a huge shining blue sapphire sphere. The moon itself was carved in with the ancient script of Mercury, while the stone seemed to glow with life and energy. The stone seemed to contain calming and rocking waters of Mercury itself. The amulet wouldn't bulge under clothes, but it was certainly large despite the fact. Isaac smiled. It was the one. Out of old thought, he pulled out his amulet from beneath his shirt.

His own amulet seemed to glow with light and life too. Mia had given him the amulet back in Imil after they revealed their feelings for each other, and Isaac never forgot that day. He'd never taken off the amulet, either. Mia later explained the amulet's full meaning, and Isaac felt it all the more appropriate to keep wearing it. It was time to return the favor to her. He smiled, stuffing his own amulet back

beneath his tunic while bringing the amulet forward to the front of the store.

"Wow, that's a beautiful one, sir. For the special someone?" The man behind the counter asked.

"Yes, it is." Isaac replied, smile beaming. "She'll love it."

"I'm sure she will. That amulet's going to cost you 2500 gold coins." Isaac jumped back at the price. He could afford it, but it was still expensive. He sighed, and quickly produced the required sum from his bag of money. "Wow, not many can afford to pay for such a thing in one payment. You must be quite the adventurer."

"I've had my share of luck finding treasure."

"Well, either way, I hope your special someone likes the amulet." He said, handing it over to the beaming Venus Adept.

"She will, but there's one thing that bugs me, sir. Do you know what these writings on the moon mean?" Isaac asked, pointing them out.

"Afraid I don't, sir. I don't even recognize that archaic language."

"I see. Thank you sir." Isaac stated, slipping the amulet into his pocket. "Have a merry Christmas."

"You too, good sir." The shopkeeper waved back. Isaac left the store and headed down the street, a smile beaming on his face. Mia would absolutely adore the amulet.

"Hey, Isaac!" A female voice sounded behind him. He winced; he prayed it wasn't Mia in the off chance she may

discover the amulet early. He spun around to see the deep purple eyes of Jenna. "Doing your shopping?"

"Finished it, Jenna."

"Tell me, who did you get?"

"I can't tell you." Isaac replied. "I didn't even tell Gareth."

"I'd expected you to say 'Mia' rather than Gareth. Does that mean what I think it means?"

"What does it mean, Jenna?" Isaac questioned.

"It means you were shopping for Mia, doesn't it?" Jenna smirked. "Don't hide it, Isaac. I've known you long enough. So, what did you get her?"

Isaac laughed. "You've got me pegged, Jenna. I'll show you as long as you keep it a secret, okay?"

"You know me, Isaac. I've never blabbed a secret to anyone before." Isaac smiled at his friend's truthfulness. He pulled the amulet from his pocket and held it out to her. Jenna looked absolutely stunned at the necklace. "Isaac. . . it's the most beautiful piece of jewelry I've ever seen! Those aren't even my favorite colors, and I love it! Mia will go nuts over it!" Jenna said in disbelief. "It's so perfect, Isaac."

"Thanks. It took a long time to find it. I'm not letting this baby out of my sight until tomorrow." Isaac stated, the amulet still in his outstretched hand. "That's right, nothing's getting a hold of it while I'm . . ." He halted as he felt a sudden tug on his hand and the loss of some mass within it. He looked down to see the amulet gone, and he looked up to see a large sea gull carrying it away in its claws. "Damn it!" Isaac shouted, chasing after the bird.

"Isaac, wait!" Jenna called to him, following her friend's pursuit.

"Rotten bird!" Isaac shouted, chasing after the bird as it lofted high into the sky, amulet still in its small talons. "I hate sea gulls! They're so annoying!" Isaac grumbled to himself, keeping pursuit close. It lighted onto a building roof, into what appeared to be a nest. There was no ladder to the roof, and it looked like a private residence.

"Great, just great." Isaac muttered, Jenna finally catching up. "It's on that roof! How do we get it down now?!"

"Stay calm, Isaac. Let's just go ask and see if the people living here would be so kind as to let us get up to the roof."

"Good plan." Isaac stated, following Jenna to the front door. The Mars Adept rapped on the door moderately hard, and the sounds of footsteps were heard approaching. The door opened, and an elderly man was at the door.

"Excuse me, sir, but may we ask a favor of you?" Jenna asked, eyes closed.

"Sure thing, Miss Knockout herself!" A familiar voice answered. Jenna's purple eyes shot open, and she caught sight of old Gil from a few days ago. "Couldn't resist old Gil, could you? I knew you'd want some of my love!" His further speech was impaired by a punch from the Mars Adept to the stomach. Gil fell to the ground passed out again.

"Pervert!" Jenna muttered to herself. "I thought I was rid of you."

"This is something I don't want to know, right?" Isaac asked.

"What?!" A voice from inside the house rang out.

"Not him, too. . ." Jenna slapped her head.

"What?!" The voice of Joe rang out again.

"Excuse me, but we need some help! A bird stole something from me and landed on your roof!"

"A curd droll from Lee and banded on Tour's hoof?!" A different voice sounded.

"Shut up, stupid!" A woman's voice shouted out. A rather large and ugly woman came to the door and stood before Isaac. "What do you want?!"

"Um, ma'am. You see, a bird stole something from me and it found its perch on your roof. I'm asking permission to go up onto the roof and grab the item."

"Let me think." The woman stated. "NO!" She slammed the door in Isaac's face, leaving him bewildered.

"Well, that went well." Isaac sighed. "All right, what's our next option?"

"A ladder." Jenna stated. "I saw the shopkeeper down the road using one." She charged down the road and came back shortly with the ladder.

"Good work, Jenna. Let's get the necklace. You hold the ladder, I'll climb to the roof and grab it." Isaac clambered up the ladder and made a grab for the roof. As he was about to climb up onto the roof, he heard a voice below him.

"I told you hooligans that you weren't allowed on MY roof!" The ugly woman yelled out the second story window. Her

large and fat arms reached out from the window and shoved the ladder from beneath Isaac.

"WHOA!!!" Isaac shouted as he fell from the ladder and into a snowbank. The cold white powder broke his fall, but he was not at all pleased. "OW! Hey! That was uncalled for, ma'am!" Isaac shouted up to the woman, who doused him with a bucket of freezing cold water. "YOW!" Isaac shouted, getting to his feet, freezing his butt off. He stood shivering as he heard the window above him slam shut.

"Wow, that was really mean." Jenna said. "Hold still, Isaac. I'm going to try to dry you off." Her hands began to glow with red Psynergy, as warm heat spread over Isaac's freezing body. Soon, he could feel himself return to normal temperature, and Jenna halted with her warming process.

"Now what?" Isaac asked. "I know! A rope and hook!" He reached into the small bag at his waist and produced a large grappling hook and a long rope.

"Thank goodness for those magic holding bags, eh, Isaac?" Jenna asked.

"You know it!" Isaac replied, winging the hook to the roof and latching it around the chimney. "Here we go!" He said, shimmying up the rope. It was hard to keep climbing, but he was more than motivated to make it to the top. When he finally was about to reach the top, he could hear the voice of the woman down below on the ground. She was definitely yelling at Jenna.

"You little brat! What gives you the right to do these kinds of things? First you disobey me with a ladder and now with a rope? I hope your boyfriend's not up there because he's getting a one way ticket back down!" She yelled, pulling down on the rope with all of her weight. Isaac heard the

scraping of the hook as he fell back into the snowbank he did earlier, the hook clanging onto the ground nearby.

"Ow." Isaac said, sitting up.

"And you're as bad as she is! You and your girlfriend needs to learn some manners."

"She's not my girlfriend, miss. The amulet on the roof is for my girlfriend for Christmas."

"Well, what might your girlfriend look like? You can't do any worse than this wench." She said, pointing to Jenna.

"Hey!" Jenna shouted, getting ready to throttle the woman.

"Jenna, please. Restraint." Isaac stated holding her arm back. "My girlfriend is the most beautiful girl I've ever met. She has long flowing blue hair and she wears robes of the purest white, the most soothing purple, and the most beautiful blue. Her eyes sparkle with the beauty of the sea, and her. . ."

"Enough!" The woman shouted. "I met your girlfriend the other day. Was she with some ugly guy with blue tinted glasses and sporting a black cape?"

"Must've been Triad." Isaac shrugged. "He's one of my friends."

"Your bitch of a girlfriend cost me a beautiful dress the other day."

"Excuse me?!" Isaac stated, angrily. "Mia's a lot nicer than you'll ever hope to be!"

"I'm glad your stupid present is stuck on the roof, because you'll never get it! I'll call the constable if you try to get up on my roof again." Isaac sighed. That was it. He lost the present to Mia, and there was no way to get it back. The woman's words drowned out in his mind; his mind focused on how to explain to Mia how this happened. Suddenly, a strange blow came to the top of his head, and it fell into his hand.

"What the?" Isaac said, looking into the palm of his hand; the amulet lay within it. "Wow!" Isaac said, looking up. The bird had taken flight again, and the amulet had apparently fallen from its grasp. Isaac's body was filled with relief as he held the amulet in his hand.

"Are you listening?!" The woman snapped. "What's this?!" She exclaimed, snatching the amulet from Isaac's hand.

"Hey! That's mine!" Isaac shouted.

"It's mine now. Consider it payment for your trespassing." The woman sneered, cupping it in her hand. Isaac's body trembled with rage, and he was about to lose his temper. He flung his hand outward, ready to send a Quake attack to shake things up a bit. However, before he could, a small rock fell from the second floor window above them and hit the woman on the head. The woman fell unconscious, her hand loosening around the amulet. It now lay open in the palm of her hand, and Isaac was quick to take it back.

"Merry Christmas!" A voice shouted from above.

"Thanks, Joe!" Jenna shouted up to the window.

"Your Welcome!" The voice shouted back.

"Yeah, thanks!" Isaac shouted.

"What?!" Joe shouted down.

Isaac and Jenna laughed heartily as they left the area and headed back to the inn. "Jenna, I wanted to thank you for helping me today. It meant a lot to me."

"Thanks, Isaac. It was my pleasure. You're like a brother to me, and you know it. Never hesitate to ask me for help, okay?"

"I'll keep that in mind." Isaac stated, slipping the amulet in his pocket. "Now, let's go get something to eat! I feel like I have a Garet sized appetite right about now!"

***Chapter 8*: The Perfect Gift?**

"It's Christmas!!!" Was the first sound Triad heard as he rolled over in bed. "Come on, Triad. Get up! Don't you want to go open presents?!" Ivan exclaimed.

"Five more minutes." Triad mumbled. "Wait. Did you say presents?!"

"Yes."

"Then what are we waiting for?!" Triad exclaimed, leaping from his bed wide awake and ready to go. He quickly changed and he and Ivan bounded down the stairs quickly and stuck their wrapped presents under the decorated tree. Triad was apparently the last one to awaken, as everyone else was already downstairs eating breakfast. There was idle chatter among the lot of them, and Gareth seemed to be telling a story.

"And then, as soon as Isaac went to open the chest, it grew fangs, eyes, and teeth! A mimic jumped out at us and tried to eat us alive!"

"Actually Gareth, it was you who tried to open the chest, and you know it." Isaac stated. "Someone deserves to get coal for Christmas for being such a fibber."

"Yeah." Mia agreed. "You ought to be ashamed, making my Isaac so greedy."

"All right. I opened the chest, big deal." Gareth shrugged. "Anyway, the mimic started chasing us all around the cave. It was quite funny."

"Yeah, especially when it bit you in the hindquarters." Isaac laughed. "It took a lot of Cure power to fix that. I'm just glad Mia didn't have to deal with it."

"Me too." Gareth chuckled lightly.

"Well, if your fascinating tale of a mimic making a meal of Gareth's posterior is finished, why don't we open presents since Mr. Lazy has finally gotten out of bed?" Jenna asked, sarcastically.

"Hey! I'm not lazy!" Triad retorted. "I just sleep a lot!"

"Triad, give it up." Mia stated, resting a hand on his shoulder. "You'll never beat Jenna in an argument."

"Darn. Oh well. Presents!" Triad shouted turning to the tree.

"Easy, Sparticus." Isaac laughed. "We'll take turns. We'll draw lots to decide who goes first. Shortest straw wins." Isaac stated, holding out a bunch of straws in his out stretched hand. Each of the adventurers drew their straws. When all was said and done, Felix was to go first, then Ivan, then Dargon, then Jenna, Sheba, Triad, Gareth, Isaac, and finally Mia.

Felix gave off a rare smile as he fetched his gift and set the wrapped box on the table in front of him. He tore the wrapping paper off carefully and pried open the box. He produced a pair of brand new black boots. Felix gave out a strong laugh. "Now I gotta guess who gave these to me. Hmm. . ." Felix puzzled. "Jenna, did you get these boots for me?"

"No, I did not, Felix."

"Well, who did?"

"They can choose to remain anonymous, remember that, Felix." Sheba pointed out.

"Well, thank you, whoever got me these." Felix stated, taking off his old boots and putting his new ones on. They fit perfectly, and given how worn his old boots were, they were considerably more comfortable. Garet smiled inwardly; he'd never tell him that he got the boots. "Your turn, Ivan."

Ivan smiled, finding the package with his name. He tore the wrapping paper off carefully, and he too smiled at his gift. "Wow! A book! It's just what I needed for the long voyages ahead!" Ivan exclaimed. "And I'll bet money it was Isaac who bought it."

"Wasn't me." Isaac stated, shrugging.

"Well, if it wasn't you and it wasn't Sheba, then. . . Triad."

"Nope, not me, bro."

"Darn. I give up. Who did it?" Felix chuckled lightly, but so softly, no one could hear him. He wasn't about to give himself away.

Dargon immediately went for his present and scrutinized the package very carefully before going after the wrapping paper. His box contained a brand new set of leather gloves; just the thing Dargon wanted, and needed, for the holidays. "Okay, who's responsible for this?" Dargon asked, pretending like he was angry. "Because I want to thank them for it." He smiled and several laughed. "Let me guess. I think it was Ivan who got these for me."

"Well, you'd be right, Dargon." Ivan smiled, putting his hands up in the air. "You got me. Jenna, it's your turn."

"Fun." She stated, finding the small package quickly. "Wow, I'll bet great things come in small packages!" She said, setting the box on the table, and opened it quickly. She smiled in pleasure of what she found. "Perfume! It smells really nice!" She said, uncapping the bottle and smelling the fragrance perforating through the top. "Triad, was it you who got me this?"

"Nope, but I do seem to remember not having a pleasant time with it."

"What?"

"Never mind, I'll explain later."

"Well, I know Gareth didn't do it, because he's not smart enough."

"Hey!"

"Ivan couldn't have done it, so . . . my guess would then have to be. . . Mia."

"I surrender." Mia stated, smile beaming. "I figured you and Gareth would enjoy the scent."

"I'm not big on perfume." Gareth muttered. Jenna quickly sprayed a little on each wrist and walked over to Gareth. The male Mars Adept started babbling like an idiot. "Wow. . ."

"See what I thought?" Mia smiled.

"Sheba, I think it's your turn." Ivan stated to her. The female Jupiter Adept smiled and walked over to the tree and found her present. She brought the long flat box to the table and set it down. She opened it without haste, but without

dallying either. The young girl pulled out the cream and turquoise tunic and gasped with delight. "Wow! It's so perfect! Ivan, I would've said you got it for me if I hadn't see you buy Dargon's gloves. . . so. . . who could've?" She paused for a moment, thinking. "I'll bet it was Triad, who probably picked up what I wanted from Ivan."

"Right person, wrong method." Triad stated, with a smile. "Whose turn is it now?"

"Yours." Isaac stated.

"MY TURN!" Triad shouted, leaping to his feet. "I wonder if anyone got me that life I wanted." He joked, searching through the Christmas tree. While he was busy, Dargon shot Felix an 'I told you so' glance. Triad came out with a heavy package, and he set it on the table. Unlike his predecessors, who had been careful opening their presents, Triad went after it like a rabid junkyard Doberman. "Wow! Books! Reading material!" He said, holding up his novel and physics book. "The Fundamental Laws of Advanced Physics and Paladin's Heart! Nice combo!" Triad said, smile beaming. "Okay, now then. . . who got it for me. . . Felix, was it you?"

"No, it wasn't." Felix smiled.

"Then it must've been Dargon."

"Bullseye." Dargon stated, smiling. "Your turn, Garet."

"Fun! It's my turn!" He rummaged through the remaining presents and found his package. "I can't wait to see what it is." He exclaimed, tearing the wrapping paper like Triad had. "What the!?" He exclaimed, holding out a bag. "Coal?! Who would get me a bag of coal on Christmas?!"

"Wasn't me." Triad smiled.

"If you hadn't already been cornered for giving Sheba a gift, I would've throttled you then." Gareth frowned.

"Garet, I saw another present with your name on it under the tree." Jenna stated, nonchalantly.

"What?" Gareth said, returning to the tree. Sure enough, there was one additional package under the tree marked with his name. "I hope it's not more coal."

"It's probably kindling." Triad joked again. "Maybe matches."

"Can it, Triad." Gareth said, ripping open his gift. He produced a pair of enormous brown boots from the package. "Boots!" Gareth exclaimed. "I know who did this now. . . the coal helped give it away." Gareth smiled, walking over to Jenna. He gave her a warm hug and whispered 'thank you' into her ear. As soon as he did, he was paralyzed by the wonderful smell of Jenna's perfume. "Duh. . ."

"Isaac, it's your turn." Jenna stated, trying to break free of Gareth's bear hug. "Mia, next time, get me a perfume that doesn't paralyze him with love!"

"Note taken." Mia smiled. She glanced over to Isaac, who had already picked up his gift and set it on his table. He opened the box quickly after he removed the paper. His eyes grew wide as he pulled out a brown snap-brimmed hat.

"Cool!" Isaac exclaimed, putting the hat immediately on his head. "All I'm missing is a bullwhip." He joked. "Well, what do we have here?" He asked, pulling out a knife in a small sheathe. He drew it and looked at it carefully. "A field knife! Hey! That was really nice. . . ooh, nice quality, too!" Isaac smiled looking at the blade. He noticed one other thing in the box, and he removed a pink bottle. "Love potion?! What

the?!" Almost everyone burst out laughing. "Okay, who's the wise guy?! Gareth. . ."

"Wasn't me."

"Then it could've only been. . . Sheba!" Isaac glared at the young Jupiter Adept, who was smiling sweetly and innocently.

"What?"

"Now you know, Mia and I don't need a love potion. On the other hand. . ." He said, approaching her and Ivan. "Little Ivan here could certainly use it." He laughed, handing the bottle to the male Jupiter Adept.

"Hey!" Ivan shouted, as everyone except him and Sheba burst out into strong laughter. Sheba merely blushed like a beet and Ivan seemed as mad as a swarm of hornets. "Mia, you better open your present before I get half a mind to hurt Isaac!"

"Okay, anything to keep your mind occupied." Mia sighed, picking up the tiny package and setting it on the table. She tore open the wrapping paper like everyone else and opened the lid of the small box within. Isaac tried to keep a poker face as Mia reached into the box, but he knew his efforts would be futile. He knew as soon as Mia saw the necklace, she'd know who got it for her. Mia's hand exited the box grasping on the platinum chain of the necklace. Her face was filled with joyful shock, total and complete. Mia couldn't form any words from her mouth, and everyone else remained silent. Finally, Mia ran immediately over to Isaac and kissed him adoringly.

"Well, I think she guessed right." Gareth muttered to Jenna.

"Isaac, I don't know what to say. . ." Mia whispered in his ear. Isaac pulled back an inch and wiped a tear from Mia's eye.

"Then don't say anything." Isaac smiled.

Snowflakes found their way into the spiky hair of Isaac. He was sitting on the roof of the inn, gazing off to the horizon, to the sea. It was now dusk, but his Christmas had been perfect, no doubt about it. He was surrounded by his closest friends and his love, so, how could it have been better? He stopped. His thoughts immediately turned to his mother and father, who had both passed away. The only thing that would've made this year perfect is to have had them present through the whole day. His mind turned back the clock while he sat staring. His thoughts returned to the day the boulder had fallen on Vale and taken the life of his father and most of Jenna's family. The time after that was not easy for young Isaac, but his friends and his mother helped him through the tough times.

Then, after Alex's defeat at the Jupiter Lighthouse, Isaac and all of his friends had returned to their homes. Isaac's mother had been sick for weeks, as it turned out; sick from loneliness among other things. Isaac had always tried to help her from the day he returned, but six months after his arrival, his mother passed away. Stricken with grief, Isaac left Vale. The loss of his mother was as terrible as his father's death, and he feared he would've never recovered if it wasn't for. . . Mia. Her love and care soothed the loss of his mother, and he found his love of her because of it.

"What are you doing up here on the roof, Isaac?" A familiar voice echoed from behind him. Mia had climbed out the same window he did to reach the roof, so she sat down

beside Isaac. She paused as she looked into his eyes. "You're thinking about them again, aren't you, Isaac?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. . . it can be tough this time of year."

"I know your loss was tough too, Mia. . ." Isaac trailed off.

"I'm just glad you were there to help me through it." Mia sighed, sadly. She rested her head on Isaac's shoulder.

"I'm just glad you were there to help me deal with the loss of my mother."

"Yes. . . it's a gift enough to have you around." Mia stated.

"By the way, I translated the runes on this amulet. Are you in the least curious of what they mean?"

"I wondered what it meant from when I picked it up."

"Well, translated, the runes indicate that this amulet is a symbol of undying love for the person that is given it."

"Appropriate." Isaac smiled.

"Also, it is usually considered to be a marriage proposal." Mia smiled.

"What?" Isaac looked stunned for a moment.

"Relax, Isaac. I was kidding. However, the undying love part was true enough." Isaac laughed aloud.

"It's not like I'd have any problem marrying you, though."

"I wouldn't either, but I say we wait awhile first." Mia smiled. They were quiet for awhile after Mia's statement, both

staring out to the sea. Eventually, Isaac could hear Mia humming softly.

"What's that you're humming, Mia?"

"It's an old Christmas song from the Mercury Clan. Normally, one would sing it."

"Why don't you?"

"Isaac, I'm not really a singer. . ." She blushed. "Besides, I doubt you'd understand it. The lyrics are in the ancient language of Mercury."

"I don't care." Isaac replied. Mia sighed and began singing the song quietly to Isaac in a voice that could only be described as of the heavens. Mia had been correct when she said Isaac would have no idea what the song meant, but she was wrong about not being a singer. She finished moments later, and Isaac wrapped his arm around her. "That was beautiful, Mia."

"I don't think I pronounced everything right, though."

"Don't make me repeat myself, Mia." Isaac smiled. "I couldn't think of a better way to end a Christmas than this way."

"I can't either." Mia said. "Except maybe like this." Mia smiled, pulling Isaac into a warm kiss. When she finally broke the kiss, she whispered only one thing into Isaac's ear. "Merry Christmas, Isaac."

-End